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RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHSK RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHYE #0742 2921329  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 191329Z OCT 09  
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9644  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0766  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0615

UNCLAS YEREVAN 000742

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AJ](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: "JUDO DIPLOMACY" BRINGS AZERBAIJANI ATHLETES TO YEREVAN

(U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On September 29, DCM met with the Armenian Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, Armen Grigorian, to discuss the successful "judo diplomacy" involving Azerbaijani athletes participating in a September competition in Yerevan. DCM also informed the Minister about the DOS Sports Envoy Program, and offered to nominate a sports envoy from the USA to host in Armenia. The Minister expressed his desire to cooperate with the Embassy in the training of players and re-training of coaches.

#### SUCCESSFUL YOUTH JUDO CHAMPIONSHIP IN YEREVAN

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¶2. (SBU) DCM congratulated the Minister on the successful completion of the European Youth Judo Championship held in Yerevan, September 11 to 13. Teams from Europe and the Caucasus, including the Azerbaijan youth judo team, attended. The minister explained that Armenian and Azeri cooperation in sports began with the 2007 World Wrestling Championship held in Baku. Minister Grigorian travelled to Baku for negotiations with the Azeri Ministry of Sports under the auspices of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Federation of Wrestling. Success in the day-long negotiation enabled the Armenian wrestling team to participate in the Baku tournament and return home without incident.

¶3. (SBU) This year, a delegation of the Armenian Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs and the World Judo Federation drafted an agreement to allow judokas from Azerbaijan to compete in the regional youth judo tournament in Yerevan. All security-related issues raised by the Azerbaijani side were addressed and the agreement was signed in the presence of the President of the World Judo Federation and a representative from the IOC.

¶4. (U) A fifteen-member Azerbaijani team stayed a total of eight days and participated in the three-day tournament in Yerevan. They took home one gold, one silver, and three bronze medals. Grigorian said "When the flag of Azerbaijan was raised and their national anthem was played, there was no negative reaction from the crowd. The Armenian people accepted them in the spirit of sportsmanship." Local Armenian media quoted the Azeri participants' expressions of appreciation for Armenian hospitality. The single negative report focused on a postcard-sized flag of Nagorno-Karabakh mounted in one of the busses transporting the judokas from their hotel to the arena. Minister Grigorian stressed that this was not officially sanctioned by the government and it was an oversight on the part of the bus driver.

#### FURTHER SPORTS COOPERATION

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¶5. (SBU) The successful organization, execution and security of the tournament were hailed by the head of the EU Olympic Committee. A special committee, headed by the Armenian Prime Minister, has been

tasked to arrange security for future international championships and tournaments as need be. The Azerbaijan authorities have given their tacit support to conducting tournaments that foster regional participation. Both sports ministries understand that regional cooperation in sports is possible when guided by the Olympic principles of sports without politics.

¶6. (SBU) Just as "soccer diplomacy" has played a constructive role in facilitating Turkish-Armenian dialogue, so too might sporting events contribute to a more positive atmosphere between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Post will look for opportunities to support such athletic interaction, including the ECA-Sponsored Sports Envoy Program.

YOVANOVITCH